

GROWING FAMILIES™...

A Newsletter For Those Who Care For Childbearing Families and Neonates

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©SAFETY IN PREGNANCY... LIFESTYLE CHOICES

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Behavioral Objectives: After reading this newsletter the learner will be able to:

1. Describe guidelines for a healthy lifestyle during pregnancy.
2. Discuss 3 lifestyle choices which could have negative effects on fetal development.

As a fetus develops, he or she is totally dependent on the mother's body for adequate support, growth and development. Many aspects of the mother's lifestyle have the potential to impact the fetus, including nutrition, oxygenation, activity level, body temperature, and exposure to chemicals.



The healthcare provider plays a key role in educating women, whether pregnant or planning to become pregnant, about lifestyle choices that can positively or negatively impact their developing babies. This newsletter will discuss selected lifestyle choices of the pregnant woman and possible effects on fetal development. Guidelines for a healthy lifestyle during pregnancy will be highlighted, as well as choices that could have negative effects on fetal development.

ACTIVITIES DURING PREGNANCY

Many women choose to continue their very active lifestyles during pregnancy. This is ideal, as long as some basic safety principles are followed.

Exercise and Sports: Regular exercise provides many benefits for the pregnant woman and fetus, including weight management, stress reduction, increased feeling of well-being, and promotion of fitness for the birth process and postpartum recovery.

Pregnant women without risk factors should be encouraged to exercise for 30 minutes per day. Women who have not been exercising previously should not begin a strenuous program during pregnancy.

For these women, recommended exercises include walking, riding a stationary bike and yoga.



Women who are accustomed to regular exercise can continue during pregnancy, with a few precautions. Moderation is the rule, as very strenuous activity done throughout pregnancy may decrease placental circulation, resulting in fetal growth restriction.

Activities that carry an increased risk of injury or abdominal trauma, such as horseback riding, rock climbing, basketball, and water- or downhill skiing, should be avoided. In general, activities that cause hard, jerky, or bouncy movements, or result in the Valsalva maneuver, in which the woman holds her breath and bears down, should also be avoided. Scuba diving, with its resultant changes in pressure, is not safe at any time during pregnancy.

The woman's balance, coordination, and center of gravity are altered during pregnancy, and ligaments are looser, and more prone to injury. Therefore, caution must be used during any sport activities. During exercise, the woman should be aware of her level of exertion. She should be able to talk throughout the activity—if not, the exercise should be slowed down until she can. The heart rate should stay under 140 bpm during exercise. Overheating should also be avoided, as increased body temperature has been associated with some pregnancy complications.

The woman should be cautioned not to exercise flat on her back after the first trimester, to avoid supine hypotension and compromised circulation to the placenta. A well-fitting bra should be worn during exercise to support the enlarged breasts. Exercise should be stopped immediately and the physician called, if the woman experiences chest pain, vaginal bleeding or fluid leakage, contractions, calf pain, headache, or dizziness.

Exercise is not safe for all pregnant women. All women, and especially those with risk factors, should obtain the approval of their physician or midwife before doing any exercise. Women with risk factors, such as chronic illness, multifetal pregnancy, or pregnancy-induced hypertension, may be instructed not to exercise during pregnancy.

Hot tubs and Saunas: While the use of a hot tub or sauna may prove relaxing to the pregnant woman, there are some related safety and health concerns. An increase in body temperature, caused by fever, exercise, or immersion in hot water, may be associated with an increased risk of spontaneous abortion and neural tube defects.

Use of saunas, hot tubs and hot baths should be avoided during the first trimester, and ideally throughout pregnancy. If used thereafter, however, the heat of the water or sauna should not exceed 100°F, and the mother's temperature should not exceed 100°F (38°C). Water-borne illnesses, such as mycobacterium pneumonia, can also be contracted from a poorly-maintained hot tub or sauna.



Travel: Travel is generally considered safe throughout a low-risk pregnancy, although women should obtain the advice of their physician or midwife before traveling. Several factors should be taken into account before planning a trip. Destinations that may cause medical problems for the pregnant woman should be avoided. These include places where the drinking water is not safe, where adequate health care cannot be obtained, or where diseases such as malaria are likely to be transmitted. Toward the end of pregnancy, some types of travel, such as by airplane or cruise ship, may be curtailed due to regulations of these companies. Women with high-risk pregnancies may choose to avoid traveling long distances, to prevent the complex problems that occur with hospitalization or birth of a preterm baby far away from home.

Travel may cause more discomfort and fatigue for the woman during pregnancy than it did before pregnancy. Whether traveling by car, airplane, train, or bus, she should be encouraged to walk around every hour or so and flex her feet several times an hour to increase circulation. She should stay well-hydrated, and take frequent bathroom breaks to prevent urinary tract infection. Seat belts should always be used, with shoulder harnesses whenever available, and fastened snugly under the abdomen.



Sexual Activity: For low-risk women, sexual activity is considered safe throughout pregnancy. The woman should engage only in sexual activities that are comfortable for her and do not exert a great deal of pressure on the enlarged abdomen. After the first trimester, the supine position should be avoided, as hypotension may occur.

The desire for sexual activity often varies throughout pregnancy. During the first trimester, breast discomfort, nausea and fatigue may impact this, while in the third trimester, positioning difficulties and shortness of breath may make intercourse more difficult. Many women find the second trimester to be the time in which sexual activity is most pleasurable.

Vaginal intercourse and/or female orgasm should be avoided for women at risk for miscarriage, preterm labor or those with vaginal bleeding or premature rupture of membranes. To prevent potentially dangerous infections, women should not start new sexual relationships or have multiple sexual partners during pregnancy.

Employment: Many women continue to work at a paying job during pregnancy, either by choice or financial necessity. In most cases, this poses no harm to the mother or fetus. Generally, jobs that involve heavy lifting, heavy physical labor, or physical hazards, such as working on high scaffolding, should be modified for the duration of pregnancy. Likewise, occupations that involve exposure to any substances, such as solvents, paints, other chemicals, or radiation, must be carefully examined to determine if there is any fetal risk.

Women who work in a sedentary environment should be encouraged to avoid prolonged sitting or standing. A walk around the office every hour, as well as flexing feet while sitting or rising up on toes while standing, helps to improve circulation.

Stress: Whatever the woman's lifestyle, her mental and physical health, and her baby's health, can be compromised by unhealthy stress levels. High stress levels are associated with increased risk of preterm birth and low birthweight. Symptoms of unmanaged stress include headaches, fatigue, disturbed sleep, anxiety, and under- or over-eating. Techniques such as yoga, meditation, guided imagery and progressive relaxation can help to bring stress levels under control.



Domestic violence is once major source of stress that many pregnant women face. Violence often begins or escalates during pregnancy, placing this population at increased physical and mental risk. The woman can be assisted by offering empathy and support, helping her to create a safety plan, and contacting a domestic violence organization for help, if the woman chooses.

ASSESSMENT & EDUCATION

At the pre-conception or initial pregnancy visit, a thorough lifestyle inventory should be taken to identify the educational needs of the woman. A calm, supportive, and non-judgmental approach is key to obtaining accurate information and establishing a trusting, therapeutic relationship. Elicit information in a manner that does not imply right/wrong, or put the woman on the defensive. Instead of asking, "You don't ride horses or do any other dangerous activities, do you?" say, "What hobbies, activities or sports do you enjoy?" For sensitive topics, such as sexual activity, increase the woman's comfort by emphasizing the normalcy of the concern, such as, "Many pregnant women wonder about sexual activity during pregnancy. What concerns do you have?"

Once a thorough lifestyle inventory is taken, to include such factors as work, exercise, sexual activity, stress, and travel, an education plan can be developed, focusing on the areas of need. Include additional assessments periodically throughout pregnancy, as the woman's needs and concerns change with each trimester. Remember to remain supportive and non-judgmental throughout the education process. Your role is to present the facts and options for the woman—she must then make her choices.

Lifestyle can greatly affect the pregnant woman's physical and mental state, and that of her baby. A thorough assessment and education plan can help the woman to make healthy choices. A future newsletter will focus on lifestyle choices concerning substance use and abuse.



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